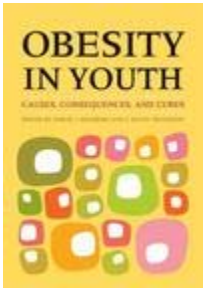
PsycCRITIQUES
September 30, 2009, Vol. 54, No. 39, Article 3



A Weighty Problem: The Rising Tide of Overweight and Obesity in Youth

A Review of

Obesity in Youth: Causes, Consequences, and Cures
by Leslie J. Heinberg and J. Kevin Thompson (Eds.)
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009. 241 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-0427-4. $59.95

doi: 10.1037/a0017035

Reviewed by

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Two thirds of the adult population in the United States meet criteria for being either overweight or obese. Although the trend toward weight gain seen for the past 25 years appears to be leveling off (Ogden, Carroll, McDowell, & Flegal, 2007), the health consequences of overweight or obesity continue to be far reaching, with medical expenses related to excessive weight expected to exceed $100 billion by 2010 (Wang, Beydoun, Liang, Caballero, & Kumanyika, 2008). Weight-related morbidity and mortality remain high. Although they have been a focus of clinical outcome research for years, current behavioral treatments for adult obesity and overweight are not as effective as we would like since most individuals will regain weight that has been lost. As distressing as the current state of obesity prevention and treatment is, perhaps more distressing is the fact that the rates of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents continue to increase.

Depending on the age group, rates of overweight or obesity range from 17 percent to over 30 percent in children and adolescents (Katz et al., 2005), with rates expected to reach 46 percent of children and adolescents by 2010 (Wang & Lobstein, 2006). The majority of children and adolescents who are obese will continue to struggle with their weight as adults. Overweight and obese children and adolescents have health problems that are similar to those of adults with weight issues. Perhaps most salient is the increase in Type II diabetes. Once thought to be relatively rare in children and adolescents, it now accounts for 45 percent of new-onset cases (World Health Organization, 2008). This single example highlights the need to understand factors that contribute to the onset and maintenance of obesity as well as the treatment and prevention of obesity and overweight in children. Being able to reduce the overweight and obesity rates and successfully treat overweight and obesity in children could help to stem the rising tide of obesity and related health problems.

Though the medical causes and consequences of obesity are an essential area of research, the role of psychological and social variables in the etiology, treatment, and prevention of obesity does not receive as much attention. Given that psychological variables may play a key role in weight loss and maintenance, this is an area in dire need of further research. Leslie J. Heinberg and J. Kevin Thompson have compiled an edited volume of work by the leaders in the field in an attempt to bring some of this information together in one easily accessible volume. *Obesity in Youth: Causes, Consequences, and Cures* provides a comprehensive introduction, with a primary focus on the psychosocial elements that play a role in the development and (potentially) the treatment of overweight and obesity.

For those who are not familiar with the area of childhood overweight/obesity, the editors provide an introduction to the topic at the beginning of the volume. This can either set the stage to read the volume in the (logical) order in which the chapters are arranged or guide the reader as to which chapters may be the most important given the reader's needs. Though each chapter addresses a relevant area in the field, there are a few that stand out as particularly informative—namely, the chapter on the biological underpinning of human consumption and the chapter on the assessment of children with weight issues.

The first chapter in the volume provides a brief and easily accessible introduction to the role of hormones and genetics in energy balance. This chapter provides information that may be used to supplement clinical knowledge as well as provide an avenue to exploring how biological/genetic information can supplement or inform research on psychosocial avenues to treatment and prevention. The inclusion of this chapter is also very important as it is the only one that focuses on the biological aspects of weight.

The chapter on the assessment of children and adolescents with weight problems provides a step-by-step guide to a thorough assessment. The authors of this chapter (Varkula and Heinberg) note that the assessment described in the chapter is reflective of one a clinician would use in a specialty clinic. Though this may have been the intent, the information provided can inform general clinical assessment and assessment related to research. Detailed descriptions of a complete biopsychosocial assessment are provided, including a list of common measures used in the assessment of overweight/obesity and related areas (e.g., self-esteem, teasing, depression and anxiety, body image).

The other chapters in this volume are equally informative. The presentation follows a logical progression, starting with the aforementioned chapter on the genetic and hormonal influences at play in energy storage and expenditure. This is followed by a chapter exploring behavioral influences on weight gain—specifically the role of exercise (and lack thereof) and dietary habits. After these basic risk factors are explored, three chapters focusing on the psychosocial effects of obesity follow. These include reviews of the consequences of weight bias, body image, and psychological comorbidities frequently found in overweight and obese youth.

The third section of the volume has more clinical implications—specifically the assessment chapter discussed above and a chapter each on treatment and intervention. These last chapters are particularly relevant given the less than stellar long-term results of adult obesity treatment programs (Mann et al., 2007).

Thankfully, treatment programs for adolescents and children have demonstrated more optimistic results. This is particularly true of programs that include both the parents and child. Although family treatment of obesity appears to be the most successful, an understanding of psychological or social variables that may contribute to the etiology of overweight/obesity can only improve outcome. The sheer number of variables that could be considered as targets for research or clinical work can be overwhelming, and some are studied more than others.

The research summarized in this edited volume provides an excellent starting point and thorough references for new and seasoned researchers. The information provided in the various chapters can also be of benefit to clinicians working with this population. Though this is not a volume one would recommend to a client or client's family, the information provided can be used in a psychoeducational format. Overall, this a valuable text that focuses on behavioral, psychological, and social/environmental variables associated with the etiology and maintenance of overweight and obesity in youth.

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